

# Midcoast Meals on Wheels loosens criteria due to virus, sees over 40% jump in need

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By Kathleen O'Brien Times  
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Meals on Wheels chefs Gary Hurtubise, left, and Jurgen Wurth, right, stand with nearly 3,000 meals ready to be stored in Spectrum Generations' offsite freezer storage. *Photo courtesy of Stephanie Tanner*

BRUNSWICK — Meals on Wheels, a program that delivers free meals to people who cannot otherwise shop or cook for themselves, broadened the base of people it serves after receiving donations and federal support.

Spectrum Generations, the Maine-based nonprofit that operates the Meals on Wheels program, announced April 20 anyone over the age of 60 who is practicing social distancing in Brunswick, Harpswell or Kennebec, Knox, Lincoln, Sagadahoc, Somerset and Waldo counties, can receive free meals through the service.

Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, Meals on Wheels was designed for “older adults who struggle physically to obtain and prepare their own food, people who have chronic conditions, those recovering from medical procedures, and some who don’t have their own transportation,” according to Spectrum Generations’ website.

That change has led to a 41% increase in program members, according to Stephanie Hanner, community engagement officer for Spectrum Generations.

“We are currently serving 1,057 people a week, and anticipate that number will rise, even by tomorrow,” said Hanner.

Each Meals on Wheels recipient receives two food deliveries per week, which include two or three frozen meals, fruit, bread, juice or milk and a snack or treat. The meals are designed to be healthy and low in sodium, according to Teddi Reed, nutritional coordinator of the Midcoast regional center of Spectrum Generations.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the nonprofit served about 800 people per week statewide and had a waitlist that hovered just shy of 300, according to Hanner.

Reed said her 16 volunteers serve 134 people in Brunswick, Topsham, Woolwich, Bath, Bowdoinham, Harpswell, Phippsburg and Richmond. On average, each recipient receives five meals every week, meaning volunteers distribute about 670 meals weekly.

Since the coronavirus pandemic reached Maine, Spectrum Generations has received \$9,680 from United Way of Kennebec Valley, \$10,000 from Harvard Pilgrim, \$15,000 from Maine Community Foundation and is anticipating \$55,000 from Central Maine Power, which the organization has used to provide more meals to more people, according to Hanner.

The organization was also approved for CARES Act funding, which it hadn’t yet received as of Tuesday, according to Gerry Queally, president and CEO of Spectrum Generations.

The loosened requirements open the program to the 22.6% of Brunswick residents who are over 65, according to the 2019 U.S. Census Bureau. Statewide, 20.6% of Maine residents are over 65. Maine has a median age of 44.7, making it the oldest state in the country.

Hanner said Spectrum Generations added 28 new delivery routes in response to the increase and anticipates the greatest need for volunteer drivers will be in the Skowhegan area, but she asks people to “call us if they’re interested and able to volunteer so we can match them with an appropriate role and location.”

Not only do volunteers regularly bring food to those who need it, but they also provide human interaction someone might not otherwise receive.

"In some cases, we might be the only people they see all week," said Peter Boulet of Harpswell, a Meals on Wheels volunteer of eight years. "You're not just delivering a meal to someone, you're checking on their wellbeing."

Boulet first began volunteering for the program when he lived in California and decided to continue when he moved to Maine three years ago. He delivers food to five people across Harpswell.

"I'm mobile, I love to drive, and I wanted to do something that's helpful," said Boulet. "I've found volunteering is a great way to learn more about your own community."

Boulet said he was surprised to learn how important it can be to people's health.

"We see these people regularly and we build a relationship with them, so we're able to see if things are deteriorating," said Boulet. "We're not health professionals, but it still has great value for that person's overall."

Joan Dixon of Bath has received meals for the past few years due to "age, health, finances ... a lack of everything except age."

Dixon said she uses a walker and isn't able to move around well, making grocery shopping for herself nearly impossible. She's also in hospice care while battling cancer for the fifth time, which has made her immunocompromised, further limiting her ability to leave her home during the coronavirus pandemic.

"I don't know what I'd do without the wonderful people at Meals on Wheels who put themselves at risk to help others," said Dixon. "I think it's wonderful that they care about others and do what they do. I pray for them all every day."

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